

CHAPTER 6



Creating and Experiencing the Exhibition Medium

There's a milk can at the Holocaust Museum [in Washington, D.C.]. It's real. Where people in the Warsaw Ghetto hid records about themselves, scribbled on little pieces of paper, as a way of making a mark. And there is this milk can. And it's just tremendously evocative (M. Spock 1992, 44–08).

In 1973, visitor studies pioneer Harris Shettel published an often-cited piece called “Exhibits: Art Form or Educational Medium?” In those early and still tentative days of visitor studies and formal evaluation, he was eager to convince the museum field that “exhibits *can* be considered an educational medium, and they are therefore subject to all the same basic laws and principles that would apply to any other educational medium” (Shettel 1973, 39). Behind his argument is a long history of disagreement between those who saw the mission of museums as aesthetic and those who insisted it was educational, a divide that has come to stand for a focus on content over learner, on initiated and elite over the general public, on expert over beginner. Just as the difference of opinion between such historical figures as Benjamin Ives Gilman and George Brown Goode has been exaggerated in museum writings (see chapter 1), today we can overstate disagreements between, for instance, curators and educators. The line blurs as museums continue to acknowledge a visitor-centered mission and practice, and the possibilities for genuine, visitor-centered collaboration proliferate.¹

Leslie Bedford, “Creating and Experiencing the Exhibition Medium” in *The Art of Museum Exhibitions: How Story and Imagination Create Aesthetic Experiences*. pp. 91–128. © 2014 Left Coast Press, Inc. All rights reserved.

I am not interested in resurrecting an old argument with its either-or language. Exhibitions are both education and art, and we can think about them from numerous perspectives. To reframe the conversation and see exhibitions as the unique medium they are requires using old language in new ways, bringing the imagination back to center stage. We must ask ourselves what it would mean to see exhibitions as aesthetic experiences, with imagining—an active process, not a static noun—as the main activity. What would it look like to work in the subjunctive mood?

One might begin by examining the process for developing exhibitions, which is so critical to their success. What are the different roles on an exhibition team, and what skills and constructs does each involve? This is the approach of Polly McKenna-Cress and Janet Kamien, whose book, *Creating Exhibitions: Collaboration in the Planning, Development, and Design of Innovative Experiences* (2013) is brilliantly organized by advocacy: for the institution, for the subject matter, for visitor experiences, for design, for the project and the team. But mine is not a book about how to make exhibitions. Rather, it is about the habits of mind that every member of the team, regardless of task, should adopt if she wants to create an aesthetic experience for visitors.²

What follows is an attempt to apply the ideas inherent in my three “tent poles”—story, imagination, and aesthetic experience—to creating and experiencing the exhibition medium. Although I have pulled these ideas apart in this chapter, they are inevitably and deeply connected.

Objects Help Visitors Create Their Own Narratives

Objects—Botticelli’s *Venus*, Daniel Boone’s gun, the Book of Kells, Lincoln’s hat, and many things less memorable—are what museums “collect, preserve, and display,” as they trumpeted in their mission statements before they shifted to visitor and community engagement. But while reverence for the object may be muted in favor of making a difference to society at large, objects remain what distinguishes museums from other cultural institutions. They have the concrete evidence of human culture over time and place.

But how we think about objects’ roles in exhibitions has changed. From sacred centerpieces to punctuations for narratives to stage props, objects have undergone the postmodern transformation: personal interpretation is all. In fact, treating objects as separate reality unmoored from human interpretation

is a waste of time. Spencer Crew and James Sims, who created the Smithsonian exhibition *Field to Factory* (see chapter 2), argue that “the problem with things is that they are dumb. They are not eloquent, as some thinkers in art museums claim. They are dumb. And if by some ventriloquism they seem to speak, they lie” (Crew and Sims 1991, 159).

Crew and Sims were addressing the issue of authenticity, a criterion more important for scholars and museum professionals than for the general public. They wanted readers to understand that in crafting the twentieth-century metanarrative of the African American migration north, they basically created a stage set where objects were often chosen for their narrative power rather than their authenticity. The collections of the National Museum of American History, like most, were built over time by people whose choices reflected their personal, cultural, and historical biases. So if the goal is to create a narrative—and thus an experience—the design team’s choices are inevitably subjective on several levels. In other words, as Crew and Sims write, “authenticity is not about factuality or reality. It is about authority. Objects have no authority; people do” (Crew and Sims 1991, 163).

Unbound by institutional or professional concern for the historical record, the visitor is entirely free to respond to objects as she pleases. Since story generates story, she creates her own narrative of the exhibition’s narrative and associates with objects along the path in whatever way she pleases. As these layers of meaning making accrue over time like layers of wallpaper in an old house, the concept of *authentic* in the classic sense dissolves into air.

John Dewey had little patience for those who revered the authentic for its own sake, in part because it implied an elitist aestheticism. His criterion for judging the value of an object was whether it engendered an aesthetic experience, and not if it was an original or a copy of one. I believe that the real thing provides an important contribution to exhibition as aesthetic experience. It just may be that its “realness” is in the eye of the beholder.

This short story from the Philadelphia collection is one of many that, like the story about Babe Ruth’s bat in chapter 4, speaks to the power of the authentic object:

My first recollection of a museum . . . was in South Dakota—I believe a Buffalo Bill museum. And I remember seeing a scalp and seeing a tomahawk, and suddenly understanding as a youngster, this was real hair, this was a real weapon (M. Spock 1992, 4.7).

At the same time, it appears that something doesn't have to be the real thing—in the sense of original or authentic—to generate strong reactions. For instance, one visitor to *Choosing to Participate* told me at great length how moved she had been by the dress Elizabeth Eckford wore the morning she tried to enter Central High School (see fig. 1). But it wasn't her real dress; it was a copy sewn by the exhibit designer's mother, one of several props. The visitor may have assumed it *was* the original, or perhaps its power came from something else: the context of Elizabeth's recreated teen's bedroom with 1950s music in the background (also made up), the universality of getting ready for the first day at a new school, or perhaps the visitor's memories of the iconic photographs published in *Life* magazine of Elizabeth in her real dress. I don't know, but I do know that in our digital age, the notion of the real thing is harder and harder to pin down.

Kiersten Latham is trying. But what she is looking for is language that comes from visitors, not professionals. Her research (2013) suggests four ways people think about the "realness" of museum objects:

- Real means original or authentic;
- Everything is real, but some things are "special";
- Real is contextual, environmental, or participatory; and
- Real is "what you think it is."

In any case, it seems our concern with authenticity is limited and not terribly useful if we are thinking in terms of the visitor experience. Rather, the meaning of authentic or real emerges from the nature and quality of the interactive experience between exhibit maker, object, and visitor. Both Daniel Boone's gun and Elizabeth Eckford's dress coexist in the imagined world created simultaneously by design team and visitor.³

Metaphor Stirs the Imagination to Generate Meaning

Metaphor is the kind of term that crops up in literary criticism and academic circles and tends to turn practitioners off.⁴ But it is relevant to working in the subjunctive mood and visitor-centered practice. Metaphor involves talking about something in terms derived from something very different. By generating, not simply articulating, relationships among disparate things or ideas, metaphor expands our understanding. Thus, for Kieran Egan, it is a significant

cognitive tool. As he puts it in *A Very Short History of the Imagination*, “If the mood of the imagination is the subjunctive, its trope is metaphor” (Egan 2007, 14). Interestingly, metaphor is most evident in very young children and then begins to atrophy at age eight or nine, when literacy begins. Its disappearance over the lifespan is a loss, he says, not a gain.

Jerome Bruner writes about metaphor in literary discourse as one of several strategies writers use to recruit the reader’s imagination or “subjunctivize” reality. By this he means putting the reader in the mode of “trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties” (Bruner 1986, 26). In his felicitous phrase, metaphor “evokes zestful imaginative play” (Bruner 1986, 4).

Probably the best-known use of object as metaphor in the museum exhibitions in the United States is Fred Wilson’s extraordinary *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992.⁵ Asked to rummage through the society’s collections and bring to light whatever caught his eye, Wilson created powerful metaphors for the African American experience. The installation most often cited is the case displaying a pair of metal slave shackles juxtaposed with an elegant silver tea service.⁶



“Metalwork,” artist Fred Wilson’s installation of slave shackles juxtaposed with an elaborate silver tea service, was one of the most memorable parts of *Mining the Museum*. Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society, Item ID # MTM010.



Designer Don Hughes created a collapsing set of giant dominoes for the entrance to *Warhol's Animals: Species at Risk* at the San Diego Museum of Natural History. Photo courtesy of Don Hughes.

Artists and designers often work with metaphor. François Confino, an artist-designer much admired by his peers, created several memorable exhibitions at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles in the early 2000s. In *L.A.: light/motion/dreams*, for example, he placed a coyote on the diving board of a backyard pool to express the disappearing boundary between nature and the built environment. In 1983, exhibition designer Don Hughes used the metaphor of a collapsing row of giant dominoes to introduce the exhibition *Warhol's Animals: Species at Risk* at the San Diego Museum of Natural History. The permanent exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum unfolds as a cinema-like narrative punctuated by a number of memorable metaphorical uses of collections materials. The thousands of shoes left by Jewish victims as they entered the gas chambers is probably the most vivid and horrific, and visitors often say they are the most intense memory they have of the exhibition.

Displays like these apparently work metaphorically for many people. They are always cited, at least by museum colleagues, as among their most powerful experiences. Metaphor can express and evoke possibility, the “what-if?” open-ended interpretation and expansive creation of meaning that char-

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acterizes the aesthetic experience. While adults may be less comfortable than young children in making metaphor, they are still capable of responding to its generative energy, especially—perhaps only—when the metaphor is accessible.

Metaphor is thus one of several ways of stirring the imagination to generate meaning, or, as Dewey would say, of creating an expansion of meaning. To illustrate this key concept, Philip W. Jackson uses a simple teaspoon to explain how objects can evoke either intrinsic meaning, which is expressive and enjoyed for its own sake (“its luster and its shape, the simplicity of its lines, the balanced feel of holding it”), or extrinsic meaning, which is instrumental (its use in cracking an egg or stirring one’s coffee). He points out that a meaning can be experienced both intrinsically and extrinsically:

When I gaze at the spoon and thrill at the thought that Queen Victoria may have stirred her tea with it, just as I am using it now for my coffee, its historical meaning is being expressively undergone. If, however, I make use of that same knowledge to bolster a historical argument of some kind, I am treating it instrumentally. I could conceivably be doing both at the same time (Jackson 2000, 31).

Intrinsic meaning is indubitably characteristic of art-centered experience and it is not foreign to non-art exhibitions. Many of the Philadelphia Stories are about artifacts, not art objects, and most express intrinsic meanings:

My favorite object in all of the museum world is at the Henry Ford Museum in Michigan. . . . And that’s a test tube with Thomas Alva Edison’s last breath in it. Now that has got to be the most incredible object that any museum has. I mean, I can’t think of anything that would surpass that (M. Spock 1992, 9.10; 2000b, 17).

But other evidence of objects, like Jackson’s spoon, generate both:

My first museum memory was the color wheels, the really large color wheels at one of the art museums in New York City that were kid-size so that you could stand right up to it. They’re probably as big as me. And you could just spin colors that were transparencies. Nothing fancy. But it made me understand how mixing colors did things, and how beautiful certain colors were next to one another; I love it (M. Spock 1992, 9.13).

In the exhibition *Vietnam: Journeys of Mind, Body and Spirit* at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City in 2003–2004,⁷ an elegant glass case held an open, empty ceramic box accompanied by a small container of incense and a vase of flowers. I learned that the box was a coffin, used in the north to house the retrieved and cleaned bones of deceased family members and to provide a final resting place for their souls. The text read:

Wandering Ghosts

Unhappy Spirits of the Dead

Wandering ghosts are the unhappy spirits of people who died too young, whose deaths were violent or unexpected, or who died far from home without a proper burial by their families. The need to bring home those who have died far away and to bury them properly is deeply felt. Failure at this task is far more than a bitter personal loss; it condemns the loved one to wander the Earth restlessly for eternity.

Out of pity, people make offerings of food, paper money and clothing to these wandering ghosts throughout the year, especially on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, when all souls are freed from hell for a day.

This space is an offering to all wandering ghosts, military and civilian, Vietnamese and foreign, who lost their lives in the armed struggles and wars that engulfed Vietnam in the 20th century.

For me, the display engendered a meditation on life and death, on my generation and the futility of war, on cross-cultural understanding or the lack thereof, and many, many other things. I have often revisited it in my memory, where it continues to stir my imagination. In fact, it illustrates many of the ideas raised in earlier chapters: it had resonance, was numinous, and involved perception rather than mere recognition. However, for someone of another generation, gender, or way of thinking, this same artful arrangement of open box, flowers, incense, and bilingual poetic text could stimulate other but presumably equally expansive meanings. That they are different is less significant to this discussion than that they occur.

Uniqueness Is the Gateway to Story and Imagination

Dewey says over and over that the “*product* of art . . . is not the *work* of art,” but rather the nature of the interaction between the work and the human being who experiences it (1934, 214).⁸ The qualities of this interaction cannot be subdivided and analyzed because they adhere to the particular experience itself. As he says, “no two sunsets have exactly the same red” (215). The particular red of a particular sunset informs the aesthetic experience with it. The potential for meaningful experience, therefore, lies not in the so-called universal but in the specific, the concrete, the particular detail that can, in some circumstances, become the inspiration for what might be called the universality of emotional response.

In 2004 the distinguished stage actress Kathleen Chalfant performed a one-person play called *The Letter* at the Lucille Lortell Theatre in New York. Portraying a Jewish Socialist doctor incarcerated by the Nazis, she pours out her fear of dying in a letter to her son. As we later learn, the letter was real; the son received it along with news of her death. It is a heartbreaking performance both because of her artistry and because, as she later said (and I paraphrase): We can only understand an event like the Holocaust through a single story of an individual. In analyzing the qualities of great literature, Bruner says “it strives to put its timeless miracles into the particulars of experience, and to locate the experience in time and place. Joyce thought of the particularities of the story as epiphanies of the ordinary” (Bruner 1986, 13).

Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of the singing group Sweet Honey in the Rock, said something similar: “One of the things I’ve learned from being in Sweet Honey. . . is that when you are as specific as you can be about who you are, you are the most universal.” Describing a song she wrote about her own grandmother, she says:

We’d be singing it, and I’d see white people in the audience crying. . . . And I would think, what is it they’re understanding? Because in the song I’m saying, “I never knew that my nose was too flat, I never knew that my skin was too black.” So I’m thinking, literally, what is it about this that they get? But they had comparable experiences, and somebody in their family loved them unconditionally and let them know they were special (quoted in Toumani 2005).

The ability of the unique moment, person, or story to evoke an entire universe is a quality of an aesthetic experience in any medium, including exhibitions. The founders of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum understood this well. The exhibition weaves the specific detail—Chalfant's point—within the bigger stories. One of the many powerful experiences there is the Tower of Faces, the three-story room walled by individual photographs of thousands of Lithuanian villagers killed by the Nazis. The abstraction of mass murder is brought to life by the specificity of individual faces.

The Philadelphia Stories yield an interesting memory of an encounter with a small brush hair embedded in a painting that enabled the visitor to imagine Rubens' hand at work:

There's one other experience that I think about and that's a particular Rubens painting at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena. It's a pretty crappy painting, actually. But what's interesting to me about it is that sort of halfway up on the right side, there's a hair imbedded in the paint, just a hair from the brush. It's just sticking out of the paint. And I don't care about the painting, or what it's about . . . What interested me was that, at a particular moment in time, when the hair was connected to the brush that was connected to the hand . . . There was a particular moment when that hair came out and it stuck in the painting and it . . . had come from Rubens' hand. . . And so that, wherever you can, when you can reveal that moment, I guess that's what's the most interesting to me (M. Spock 1992, 17.9).

Turning to a more monumental example of the specific, the central atrium of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati holds an extraordinary artifact: a slave pen, found in Kentucky, that had been used to hold up to 75 slaves who were being moved to the South. All cleaned up and empty, it sits alone in the gleaming lobby. The enclosure had been completely denuded of any physical presence, rendered almost mute. At the time I visited, visitors could only enter with a guide who pointed out what to notice: up high on a rafter were the remains of a metal loop to which slaves would have been chained. That small artifact—that concrete detail—gave me at least whatever resonance the installation possesses.⁹

The transcripts from the *Open House* exhibition are full of examples of visitors connecting with the meaning of the exhibition through the concrete details of individual lives. For instance, numerous visitors remarked on the story of Henrietta Schumacher, who wasted away from “sugar sickness,” today’s diabetes, in the early 1890s. In this conversation, a 46-year-old woman (F1) and a 51-year-old woman (F2) stand in the first room—the Schumachers’ parlor—where they have discovered her portrait and that bit of information. They express amazement (what Daniel Spock calls wonderment) and empathy:

F1: Uhuh, you just, uhuh . . . Oh . . . Every morning, five o’clock . . .

Oh my god! . . . Oh, did you know that? . . . Did you read this?

F2: Yeah, I read it.

F1: Did you know that?

F2: No.

F1: I didn’t either. My goodness . . .

F2: Starvation . . .

F1: Oh . . . they only get as much food . . .

F2: Because they were the minimal amount your body could handle.

Just to keep you alive. Barely alive . . .

F1: Oh . . .

F2: Uhuh.

F1: It’d be awful to have diabetes, wouldn’t it? (Ellenbogen et al. 2006a, 40).

In *The Museum Experience Revisited*, John Falk and Lynn Dierking analyze how visitors respond to objects in exhibitions. At first they are attracted to the biggest and most valuable, but then they look for the familiar because, they suggest, people are attracted to what they already sort of know about and find interesting. They don’t respond to objects as illustrations of abstract ideas—the big ideas that animate the exhibition makers—but rather on the more superficial, concrete level of: What is it? Where does it come from? What is it used for? (Falk and Dierking 2012, 111) The *Open House* example, among many others, suggests that the concrete—and the familiar—can become the gateway to imagination and story.



A close-up of “Lucy and Desi,” the iconic figures from the Hall of Human Origins at the American Museum of Natural History. Photo courtesy of Richard Cress.

Narrativity Inspires Internal Conversations

In chapter 3, I referred to narrativity, a literary term that describes the power to evoke story in the listener’s or viewer’s mind. As suggested earlier, something does not have to be a formal story (with setting, action, and characters) in order to generate one. And the generation of story is, like every aspect of exhibitions discussed so far, highly subjective.

According to anecdotal evidence from museum staff, one of the most popular installations at the American Museum of Natural History was *Australopithecus afarensis*, known as “Lucy,” in the Hall of Human Biology and Evolution. Naturalist and writer Diane Ackerman has provided an unforgettable description of her personal encounter with Lucy and her mate in *A Natural History of Love* (1994) that illustrates the power of narrativity to evoke not only story, but, by extension, Dewey’s expansion of meaning:

A volcanic eruption, shown in the background, is coating the landscape with white ash and as they walk through the savanna, they leave a trail of footprints. Lucy's head is turned left, her mouth open. She seems startled by us. She does not know what she will become. Looking forward as he walks, her mate has his arm around her shoulder in a familiar gesture of tenderness. She doesn't know about dinner dates, Valentine's Day, custody battles. What was their courtship like? What worries them? Do they imagine a future? What delights their senses? How do they comfort their young? I long to meet them face-to-face, to reach through time and touch them. It is like recognizing one's kin across the street in a bustling city" (Ackerman 1994, 335).

In 2007, the museum opened a new Hall of Human Origins and updated the presentation. Fortunately, scientific evidence still supported the storyline of two figures, one larger than the other, walking together across the plains: two sets of footprints had been preserved in the volcanic ash for some three million years. But the museum dispensed with the rather fanciful backdrop and installed the figures at ground level. It is perhaps harder—for an adult though not necessarily for children—to empathize with these quite short (and more simian) figures, but their pose remains evocative and replete with narrativity. The installation thus meets criteria both of scientific truth and artistic authenticity.

In contrast, there is *Australopithecus afarensis* in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. This Lucy stands upright and alone in her display case, a humanlike creature hirsute but clearly female. Lacking any contextual details of setting or companion, there is no way to make the kinds of personal connections Ackerman, or anyone less fanciful, might make, no way to find story as the youngster looking at the jaguar diorama did (see chapter 2). The museum appears to have little interest in engaging the visitor's imagination and virtually none in creating any kind of aesthetic experience. Rather, the intention—as is most typical in the museum field—is to transmit information visually and through text.

The "Lucy and Desi" display in the American Museum of Natural History—as the staff nicknamed it—raises another question about storytelling in exhibitions. Are some kinds of stories more likely to engage people than others? What might exhibitions do to make the process of personal story making more active?

I suspect that the narrative that Lucy and her mate suggested to Ackerman and to me as well—a couple setting off on their life’s journey together—is one of those primal stories that crosses barriers of culture and gender. In designing an exhibition, might the team consider the effects such universal stories can have on their visitors? To my knowledge, few exhibitions do this intentionally, with the exception of Noah’s Ark in Los Angeles, discussed later in this chapter. But the creators of an excellent program for young people at the Centre for New Enlightenment in Glasgow’s Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum did. Designed to build “self-belief,” it draws quite deliberately on the Jungian archetypes depicted in Joseph Campbell’s monumental study, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, to design a set of personal challenges or quests for early adolescents. The program reflects not only the museum’s commitment to its community but its choice of story as the main interpretive strategy for the entire institution.¹⁰

In any case, it is undeniable that regardless of the exhibition maker’s intention, visitors will use their imaginations to reinterpret the story presented according to personal experience, as well as whatever master plots they may bring to it.

Written text, of course, is the usual way to tell a story in an exhibition. Two examples of object labels from quite different settings contain equally high levels of narrativity. The first accompanies a fourth-century B.C. Phoenician sarcophagus at the Beirut National Museum:

In this coffin lie I, Batnoam, mother of King Ozbaal, king of Byblos, son of Paltibaal, priest of the lady, in a robe and with a tiara on my head, and a gold leaf on my mouth, as was the custom with the royal ladies who were before me.

The second example is from a collection of photographs exhibited at the Center for Jewish History in New York City called *And I Still See Their Faces: Images of Polish Jews*:

I carried this photograph of my mama through two selections by Dr. Mengele at Auschwitz. Once, I held it in my mouth, the second time, I had it taped with a bandage to the bottom of my foot. I was 14 years old.

My dear mama, daddy, little sister Gizia and brother Abrahamek were already dead. They hid in the Plaszów camp to avoid the deportation to Auschwitz. The commandant of the camp discovered them on March 24, 1943 and shot them on the spot.

Zahava Bromberg, Tel Aviv

The second example tells a story directly, and the first does not. But both illustrate how narrativity can be enhanced by paying attention to both imaginative education and brain research. Kieran Egan urges educators to use vivid language to create images in their students' minds—a conceptual tool associated with the acquisition and mastery of literacy or Romantic understanding. Brain research contributes an understanding of how particular language works through mirror neurons. Science writer Annie Murphy Paul (2012) explains how language rich in sensory associations—lavender, cinnamon, leathery hands, or a velvety voice—light up the olfactory or sensory cortex just the way actual experience with these phenomena does. In other words, brain research suggests that in encountering pictorial and sensory language such as “a gold leaf in my mouth” or “taped to the bottom of my foot”—language that evokes an emotional response—the reader or the museum visitor is more apt to pay attention, feel, and perhaps remember the experience. Thus one senses the gold leaf in the mouth, the tiara on the head, the photograph taped to the bottom of a foot, and is completely there in the experience.¹¹

Of course, sensory-rich language can be spoken as well as written. A few years ago I went on a tour of a re-created apartment at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in Manhattan. The Irish-American family who lived there was wretchedly poor; the cost of a funeral for their youngest child eventually forced them to seek even cheaper living quarters. The educator-guide, an actor, began the experience by describing the neighborhood in the 1860s and then, reaching down to lift imaginary skirts, said, “Come. Let us pick our way through the garbage and horse carcasses and travel back in time.” Her vividly descriptive language—as well as her familiar gesture—helped me connect with this long-ago place and time.

Voice is another aspect of text and thus a shaper of the experience. The classic voice in museums is third person, usually the curator's. First-person narration is less common. In the Little Rock section of *Choosing to Participate*, the design team recorded the adult Elizabeth Eckford recalling the day she tried to enter Central High School. Her voice, although an adult interpretation of a distant though still very painful memory, forges an emotional connection to her adolescent experience in a way that a third-person interpretation could not. It is not surprising that filmmaker Ken Burns chooses so often to use first-person voice, often in the form of letters, rather than the typical documentary talking head to create narrative and emotional engagement. First person is, after all, the voice of the storyteller.

At the National September 11 Memorial Museum, the voices of witnesses will be central to the experience. A gallery called *We Remember* provides a place for visitors to contribute their personal stories to an ongoing database that will infuse the entrance to the museum with voices from around the world. Jake Barton—principal of Local Projects, the firm that designed the oral history project StoryCorps—spoke in a TED talk called “The Museum of You” about his team’s desire to create an “institution as listening experience” (Barton 2013).

Research supports the importance of first person over third. In her essay, “Write and Design with the Family in Mind,” exhibit planner and writer Judy Rand says that researchers at the USS *Constitution* Museum found that visitors preferred first-person to third-person voice in exhibition labels by a margin of almost two to one (Rand 2010, 267).

Bur third person can still have narrativity, as it does in this example from a New York State Museum exhibition called *Lost Cases, Recovered Lives: Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic*. The label text is about Ethel S., one of the twelve patients at Willard State Hospital who are profiled in the exhibition. Ethel lived at Willard for forty-three years until her death in 1973.

Ethel was the daughter of a Methodist minister. As a child growing up in Ithaca, she sang and played the piano and was active in church. When she was 18, she married a plumber named Seymour, and they soon had two children—a son in 1909 and a daughter in 1911. Seymour drank too much, flew into violent rages, and had affairs with other women. Ethel suffered a miscarriage, but then bore two more children, both of whom died as infants.

After she left Seymour, Ethel continued to support herself by sewing for her neighbors. In 1930, her divorce final, she was admitted to Willard. Her file states: “She refused to leave the place where she was living and went to bed saying she was ill. . . . As she refused to leave the house, the landlady made a petition for her commitment.”

At certain times, Ethel appeared to be content at Willard and believed that the staff could help cure her ailment. . . . At other times, Ethel proved to be sarcastic and irritable, and she refused to do any work but crocheting. She did like to read. From 1930 to 1940, her children visited her three times. After 1940, they never came to see her at all. In her 43 years at Willard, Ethel never received any psychiatric

medications. She died at the state hospital on June 12, 1973, at the age of 82.

The wooden case accompanying Ethel S.'s story contained crocheted baby caps and gowns along with quilts and tableware (quoted in Bedford 2005, 217).

This text is so long that one might assume it would shut down the visitor's imagination. But this does not happen, in my opinion, for two reasons: it reads as a story, and it doesn't tell you what to think. Rather, you are left to muse on the possible meanings. I found myself wondering why Ethel's children didn't visit her for thirty years. Was she impossible to be with? Were they ashamed of her? Were there grandchildren she never saw? What happened to make a family behave like that? And then, for me, the thought: Who am I to judge? The exhibition provides the facts but then lets the visitor construct her own meanings (Bedford 2005).

The text is similar to the kind that the director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum insisted on using in the permanent exhibition, recalls Elaine Heumann Gurian, the museum's deputy director at the time. Trained in film, Jeshajahu Weinberg went through the exhibition script deleting any language that told the visitor how to feel or think (Gurian 2000). He was ensuring that there would be an internal conversation between the visitor and his imagination.

The idea that less can be more in writing exhibition text is problematic. In recent decades, museums, especially art museums, have been criticized for failing to give visitors enough information in terms they can understand. When Crew and Sims called objects "dumb," they were undermining the classic curatorial claim that objects should be left to speak for themselves. This perspective is rarely invoked these days when museums of all sorts have adopted a host of strategies for helping ordinary people "hear" what the objects are saying.¹²

But I am talking about something else: the phenomenon, all too common, of telling visitors everything there is to know about a topic or an object rather than assuming that they can, and will, decide for themselves—if they stick around long enough to pay attention. For example, one needn't be told that life at Willard State Hospital was hard for Ethel S. The information that her family only came three times in thirty years, and that she spent her days crocheting the baby clothes that are now displayed, allows us to employ our empathic imaginations and create our own understanding of her state of mind.

Embodied Experiences Engage All the Senses

Falk and Dierking conclude that museum visitors “devote most of their time to looking, touching, smelling and listening—not to reading (2012, 113).¹³ Nonetheless, reading is what we mostly ask visitors to do, and throughout an exhibition, the visual is the main sense we employ. Imaginative education and cognitive studies—as well as visitor studies data and the field’s growing interest in accessibility and multiple modalities for learning—suggest we should broaden the sensory palate and take advantage of the benefits of a rich interaction among our various senses. One often employed is hearing.

Several Philadelphia Stories recall memories of the iconic walkthrough *Giant Heart* at Philadelphia’s Franklin Institute, where sound plays a role in sparking the imagination:

The beating heart at the Franklin Institute when I was a kid. I think I went there when I was probably eight years old. And that experience that I remember much more distinctly and vividly than I think it really occurred, where there’s this pounding, and you’re going through a heart, and you’re seeing how things might travel, and you get a really different perspective. I loved changing perspective, and to be able to feel like you were a blood cell going through, and it was great (M. Spock 1992, 9.13; 1999b, 10).¹⁴

In the 1990s, the Field Museum in Chicago installed an ambitious exhibition called *Life Over Time* that sought to teach visitors everything known about the beginnings of life on earth, employing multiple strategies for communicating such essentially incomprehensible concepts as “a billion years ago.” One delightful bit was a chance to hear how an *apatosaurus* (also known as *brontosaurus*) would have sounded lumbering across the primordial swamps. Woofers mimicked the noise that an animal the size of four elephants would make, and the floor shook (Bedford 2012, 398).

Elaborate soundscapes increase the immersive nature of many exhibitions. One of the more sophisticated, at least for its time, is the permanent exhibition at Connecticut’s Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center. Passing through the moving narrative of the Pequots’ environment before their first (and disastrous) encounters with Europeans in the late seventeenth century—a series of freestanding life-size dioramas—one hears dense layers of bird song, human voices, wind in the trees, wild animals, and other sounds



The burial scene at the African Burial Ground National Monument in lower Manhattan is brought to life by a subtle sound installation. Photo courtesy of Amaze Design, Inc.

based on meticulous historical research.¹⁵ A more recent and modest example incorporating the use of sound comes from the African Burial Ground National Monument in lower Manhattan, where hundreds of people of African descent were buried in the Colonial era. The visitor encounters a burial scene—a small coffin on top of a larger one, with several life-size figures surrounding it—and hears an audio track of the mourners' words, cries, and songs.¹⁶

Sound can be subtle and still powerful. Robben Island Museum in Cape Town, South Africa, was a prison for political leaders during the apartheid era. As visitors step inside, the guide slams the metal doors shut, evoking a visceral sense of the terror and isolation prisoners like Nelson Mandela must have known. To increase the dramatic impact of the final section of *Choosing to Participate*, the story of Cambodian American Arn Chorn-Pond, we used flute music played by Arn himself. In formative evaluation, teenagers had a gratifyingly intense response to the music; one remarked that it transported her to another place.



Open House: If These Walls Could Talk has many multi-sensory experiences for the visitor including a piano in the Schumacher's parlor; the approach of a visitor sets off a Schumann melody, a favorite of the eldest Schumacher daughter. Courtesy of Eric Mortenson, Minnesota History Center.

Children's and science museums employ the sense of smell most often, in my experience. But it is surprising that exhibition teams at other museums don't use it more often.¹⁷ This story reminds us of the powerful association between smell and memory:

My earliest recollection of doing anything in a museum was . . . [at the Brooklyn Children's Museum]. And we were making candles. And I remember that you got a piece of wood, and they tied some sort of—the wick, I guess—and they taught us some kind of song, and they had a table in the middle with hot wax. And here are the little kids, we're marching around with our wooden stick, and we are dipping—every time we got to where the vat was, you would dip your stick in and you would do some funny thing. And then of course as you walked around, the candle got fatter and fatter.

I can remember it was bayberry scents. To this day when I smell bayberry I get like a crazy woman. I had this bayberry candle until I



In the 1930s-era kitchen, visitors strain to pick up a block of ice.
Courtesy of Eric Mortenson, Minnesota History Center.

was married. . . . And I was nineteen then. That's what it meant to me. I bought three bayberry candles three years ago so I could put them in my house and light them, so my house could smell of bayberry, because it was such a happy thing (M. Spock 1992, 19.25; 2000b, 22; Spock and Leichter 1999, 46).¹⁸

After the sense of sight, the sense of touch is probably most typically invoked in exhibitions. Here is a vivid example of how somatic or embodied imagination works in the *Open House* exhibition. In the 1930s-era Italian-American kitchen, complete with period icebox, visitors can lift a big block of ice. Two 21-year-old women responded in this way:

M1: What's that?

M2: A block of ice . . .

M1: Give it a lift . . .

M2: It's forty pounds.

M1: Oh, my God! . . . (Ellenbogen et al. 2006a, 28)

Another, quite artful example is from the 120-year-old Eldridge Street Synagogue in Lower Manhattan, which reopened in 2007 as a sanctuary and museum after eleven years of meticulous restoration. It is a shimmering, color-drenched, majestic space with details that delight the eye in all directions. But according to Annie Polland, historian, museum educator, and author of *Landmark of the Spirit: The Eldridge Street Synagogue* (2009), the goal went beyond simply restoring this historic building. The restorers were storytellers; they wanted to capture the history of Eldridge Street and the vicissitudes of its immigrant population over time. So some places were left untouched. For instance, the worn pine floorboards kept the undulating grooves left by generations of worshippers shifting their feet in prayer. A visitor has only to step onto them to sense, in a powerful if inchoate way, those who were there before (Bedford 2012, 394).

While all exhibitions require visitors to move through them, the physicality of movement can be employed very intentionally. An exhibition at the Field Museum called *Inside Ancient Egypt* invites visitors to descend a spiral, dimly lit staircase into a tomb, a thrilling if disorienting experience that developer Janet Kamien felt helped turn visitors into time travelers (Bedford 2012, 398).

It may be that in employing one sense artfully, we make it more likely that visitors will believe their other senses are engaged as well. For instance, the boy who staggered out of the subway car in the *Teen Tokyo* exhibition (see chapter 4) hadn't actually experienced movement, but the sound effects coupled with other strategies created by the design team helped make him think he had. My own personal recollection of visiting the Eldridge Street Synagogue involves the creaking of old floorboards underfoot, but when I wrote to confirm this, I found out the boards, in fact, are silent.

One additional question concerns the cultural context for embodied experience. Pamela Erskine-Loftus, who works with museums in the Arabian Peninsula, writes about cross-cultural communication theory and museum practice. She argues that Western practice is "ocular-centric"; it privileges sight over other modes of perception (Erskine-Loftus 2013, 474). She mentions, for instance, how the use of "I see" in some languages connotes understanding as well as vision and how silent reading—of exhibit text, for example—is assumed to be the appropriate way of absorbing information. Arab cultures, on the other hand, are primarily audio-centric. Knowledge is shared socially and through oral traditions, and the transmission of texts is a "social activity creating relationships between the speaker and listener" (Erskine-Loftus 2013, 478). In considering how to make exhibitions

more embodied experiences—as both neuroscience and past experience suggest we should—an examination of cultural differences could be fruitful as well.

Two final examples illustrate the ways in which exhibitions can employ *all* the senses together to inspire the visitor's imagination and generate understanding. *Dialogue in the Dark* began in Germany in 1988 and has traveled to 30 countries and 130 cities. Created to give sighted people an understanding of the challenges faced daily by the blind or visually impaired, its spaces simulate subway platforms, busy city streets, parks, and shops. But the visitors don't see them because the exhibition is utterly dark. Instead, they must rely on the sounds, smells, wind, temperatures, and textures around them, the long wands they clutch in their hands, and instructions from their guides, each of whom is partially or totally blind.¹⁹ It is an extraordinary experience that, at least for the Bank Street graduate students with whom I visited it, created a profound empathy and respect for the visually impaired.



An exhibition that uses all the senses is *Sensing Chicago*, designed for families at the Chicago History Center. Here, eight-year-old Eli turns himself into a giant hot dog complete with condiments. Photo courtesy of Andrew Anway.

Design Mediates the Aesthetic Experience

Dewey says repeatedly that art doesn't *lead to* an experience; it *is* one (1934, 85). Scientists, he wrote, work "at one remove" from experience, but an aesthetic experience, as Annie Dillard's story about stopping to observe a sunset illustrates, is about being right there in the moment. The possibility for providing such an experience in exhibitions is heightened if the exhibition maker follows a familiar artistic imperative: Show me, don't tell me.

Geraldine Connolly's poem, "The Summer I Was Sixteen," uses concrete language to show rather than tell:

The turquoise pool rose up to meet us,
its slide a silver afterthought down which
we plunged, screaming, into a mirage of bubbles.
We did not exist beyond the gaze of a boy.

Shaking water off our limbs, we lifted
up from ladder rungs across the fern-cool
lip of rim. Afternoon. Oiled and sated,
we sunbathed, rose and paraded the concrete,
danced to the low beat of "Duke of Earl."

Past cherry colas, hot-dogs, Dreamsicles,
we came to the counter where bees staggered
into root beer cups and drowned. We gobbled

cotton candy torches, sweet as furtive kisses,
shared on benches beneath summer shadows.
Cherry. Elm. Sycamore. We spread our chenille
blankets across grass, pressed radios to our ears

mouthed the old words, then loosened
thin bikini straps and rubbed baby oil with iodine
across sunburned shoulders, tossing a glance
through the chain link at an improbable world.

Using all the tangible and resonant details of youth hanging around a summertime pool, Connolly enables us to enter into the moment. As Maxine Greene once remarked, poetry provides an answer that we cannot come to or provide didactically.

The aesthetic experience is not about teaching—the didactic telling—but closer to facilitating—the experiential showing or doing. This is a major reason stories work well; they provide for the listener’s interior space, the imagination, to function and create an experience. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for imaginative engagement to happen if someone else is telling you what to think.

Perhaps the exhibition team member most tasked with mediating the experience is the designer, the one who knows how to turn concepts into three-dimensional and visual experiences and underscore the unique detail and narrativity of each aspect.

Looking back at the Vietnam exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History, I wonder what it was about the display that enabled me to have the experience I had. The small shrine possessed both resonance and wonder; it provided an aesthetic experience, unique, complete, and expansive of meaning. If the box were simply left on the floor with a handwritten note, it would have interested (and puzzled) me, even made me think, but I am certain that it would neither have stopped me in my tracks, as it literally did, nor have left both a vivid image and strong emotions in its wake for weeks to come. Its artful arrangement of empty stone container, flowers, incense, and text etched on glass contributed to its power and was crafted with care by a designer.

As someone without a shred of design skill, I am always delighted by the ability of good designers to find strategies to express the concepts succinctly and artistically and help create the experience I was looking to provide. If they worked with language, they would be like the writers Bruner describes in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*: wordsmiths who know how to choose between boy, immature male, lad, or more metaphorically, colt, lamb, or fawn in describing a young male (Bruner 1986, 22), in order to find the vivid language that Annie Murphy Paul tells us fires up our mirror neurons.

The designer of *Choosing to Participate*, hearing over and over the phrase “step outside your circle of obligation” as shorthand for our main exhibition message, created a series of circles—some with people outside, others with people inside, others opened up. While simple, even obvious, and partially shaped by the needs of a traveling exhibition, this design choice mediated the experience in a totally nondidactic way.

This Philadelphia Story illustrates how design can facilitate a meaningful experience:

I was part of the high school orchestra that played at the World's Fair in 1964. . . . And my brother was in the same orchestra. And we got some free time when we weren't playing, and we went to—it must have been the Italian [actually the Vatican] pavilion—and had an experience with the Pietà that had been brought over. And it was my first experience with a piece of art that was not just about culture and interesting. . . .

And here was the Pietà, this beautiful sculpture . . . as I recall . . . there was a moving platform that we stood on in order to go in front of the Pietà. And then there was all this lighting that was changing, and there were curtains behind it. And I remember getting on the moving platform with my brother, and going by it, and being absolutely stunned and still. And when we got out of there we looked at each other and said, "Let's do it again." And we spent all afternoon going back in that line and going past that sculpture as often as we liked.

And then the conversation that got going was about the lighting and how different—you know, how the faces looked, and how the marble was cut. And how could you do that with no modern tools? . . . How did they crate it and get it over from Italy? And wasn't it remarkable that it was there? And it was one of those experiences that I will never forget. And probably the first interactive experience I had in a museum, where a piece of art was done in a setting that changed it; that allowed it to show itself differently because of the lighting. Now I don't know if the lighting just changed because on the moving platform I saw the lights from different points, or if they really did change the lighting. I really don't know and I have never investigated what was the truth about my memory. I just know that I have this powerful memory of beautiful marble that looked as soft and—it was behold-ing. I mean it was there to be beheld in a very significant way. It was just beautiful (M. Spock 1992, 5.18).

But while design is the obvious first place to examine exhibition as art form, few designers see themselves as artists. Andy Merriell, the principal of an interpretive planning and design firm in New Mexico, says he is "in the business of packaging experience. I don't think like an artist but like a planner. Artists are self-motivated. I work for someone else. I am too much of a team player to be an artist" (Merriell 2005).

Designers, like exhibition developers, come to their work from various backgrounds and, until recently, without formal training in exhibition design.²⁰ Jim Volkert, another experienced designer, writes that there are three basic ways of thinking about exhibition design: as skill set, as art form, and as process and roles (Volkert 2006, 40–41). While the category of art form might best fit the current discussion, in his analysis, it is typically about matters of taste and style and apt to describe designers for whom neither the content nor the visitor is important. Volkert, Merriell, and all the designers I have mentioned are deeply committed to both.

Nevertheless, when pushed to describe how he worked on an inaugural exhibition, *All Roads Are Good: Native Voices on Life and Culture* at the National Museum of the American Indian's Heye Center in New York, Volkert revealed a process very reminiscent of the artistic. This exhibition included an acrylic case of moccasins arranged as if in a dance with space for one more pair, so the visitor could imagine joining in. Museum professionals often cite it as among their most memorable museum experiences.

Volkert explains how he and the curator, Gerald McMaster, worked together on its creation. They began with a metaphor: the gallery as a group of twenty-three elders talking together. McMaster uttered the phrase, "Walk a mile in my moccasins," and they began to see a mile-long band of moccasins circling the room. Volkert put some out on brown paper to play with, and McMaster said it all made him think that his ancestors were there, talking with him. This led to a circle, which in turn led to a dance. According to Volkert, these moments of creative synergy cannot happen without "no-fault play," and when a member of the staff—whether curator or designer—insists there is only one way of doing things, it kills the creativity and the possibility (Volkert 2005).

Unquestionably, exhibition design is an instrumental or applied art in service to content selected by someone else. And furthermore, designers usually work on teams without the solitary artist's freedom to play. Nonetheless, their process is part of the creation of an opportunity for an aesthetic experience—if that is their intention. Certainly the process Volkert describes for *All Roads Are Good* recalls Dewey's thoughts on the making and doing of art:

In English we separate artistic and esthetic and the act of production and that of perception and enjoyment but they are integrated
Man whittles, carves, and sings, dances, gestures, molds, draws and paints. The doing or making is artistic when the perceived result is of

such a nature that its qualities as perceived have controlled the question of production. The act of producing that is directed by intent to produce something that is enjoyed in the immediate experience of perceiving has qualities that a spontaneous or uncontrolled activity does not have. The artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works. The esthetic experience—in its limited sense—is thus seen to be inherently connected with the experience of making (Dewey 1934, 47).²¹

Yet again, there is a continuum. At one end are the works of someone like Fred Wilson, a recognized artist who creates exhibitions explicitly as art; on the other is the lackluster and didactic exhibition whose design has been totally suffocated by content. In between are artistry and the potential for aesthetic experience.

Darwin at the American Museum of Natural History proved to be closer to an aesthetic experience than I anticipated. The design team worked hard to speak to visitors' emotions as well as their intellect, to make them understand and even care about Darwin's personal journey toward the publication of *On the Origin of Species* and then, having ignited our embodied selves, to help us appreciate the importance of his contribution to science. Fossils artfully displayed with a small magnifying glass, an elegant evocation of the Victorian era, also became a metaphor for Darwin's life of learning through close observation. The fossils were stunning; I overheard one visitor exclaim about a coiled snake skeleton, "How beautiful!" A narrative approach framed the entire exhibition and each of its sections, including the poignant story of Darwin's young daughter Annie's death—"Our Dear, Dear Child"—rendered especially moving by the collection of childhood treasures her bereaved mother put together. In a section called "Sandwalk," visitors viewed a continuous loop of a condensed-time video that had been taken every five feet along the "thinking path," the actual garden path that Darwin trod every day—an innovative example of trying to put visitors in someone else's shoes.

The last section of *Darwin* produced a sense of completion. The wall text—"Endless form most beautiful"—implies that the theory of evolution *can* support a spiritual view of the world—an issue raised throughout the show and exemplified by a display of living orchids. In other words, these choices turned this exhibition into *an* experience, one in which each stage sums up the values in what has preceded and evokes those that are yet to



The artful design of this case of fossils reinforces their aesthetic qualities. Photo by Denis Finnin, ©American Museum of Natural History.



"Endless Forms Most Beautiful" captures the central narrative of *Darwin* at the American Museum of Natural History. Photo by Denis Finnin, ©American Museum of Natural History.

come. *Darwin* thus illustrates Dewey's ideas of completeness and continuity within itself, raised in chapter 5: "The connectedness must be such as brings the experience not merely to a close, but to a closure. The experience runs its course to fulfillment . . . Its close is a consummation and not a cessation" (1934, 42).

In recent years, the term *experience design* has emerged in the museum field, allegedly in response to the ubiquitous phrase *experience economy*. According to Donna Braden, Ellen Rosenthal, and Dan Spock (2005), experience design means using deliberate design strategies to create experience rather than transmit knowledge—in other words, using design to do what museum professionals have been talking about for many years.

At the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, the exhibit design plays to the visitors' emotions from the beginning, and uses their predictable responses to pull them through the narrative. Nearly every key episode in Lincoln's life is framed to take advantage of the potential of the concrete and specific to evoke the universal: the death of a parent, loss of a first sweetheart, rapture of true love, wrenching (though fictive) encounter with a family being sold into slavery, and so forth. But in the section narrating Lincoln's years in the White House, the designers—BRC Imagination Arts—pull out all the stops. Visitors encounter a life-size diorama of young Willie Lincoln sick in bed—his anxious parents having left a gala (sounds of music) to check on him (Abe, with toy in hand). Visitors then turn the corner and confront Willie's picture draped in black crepe. Finally, the exhibit leads to a disconsolate Mary Todd Lincoln, now in black, rocking slowly before a rain-splattered window, tears gathering in her sad eyes. It is hard not to be moved by this, although a deep suspicion of being manipulated arises as well.

Technology Creates the Feeling of Being There

Technology is an essential part of any designer's toolkit, in part because it makes possible things we once only dreamed of. Just as object theater enabled the *Teen Tokyo* design team to install Tetsuo's Room, a highly realistic domestic setting without the maintenance headaches of the existing three-dimensional Japanese House exhibition, so Mill City Museum in Minneapolis can take visitors on a journey into the history of the flour mill through a highly inventive computer-driven show installed in the factory's old elevator.

Likewise, a 25-foot-long interactive table, designed by Potion, a New York-based firm, in the Lower East Side Tenement Museum's new exhibit, *Shop Life*, allows the museum for the first time to tell multiple stories of a single space over the years. Visitors choose an object to place on the tabletop, triggering a series of images, oral histories, and text that become visible to tell the story of the shops that occupied the ground floor of 97 Orchard Street: a kosher butcher shop at the turn of the twentieth century, an auction house in the 1930s, a lingerie store in the 1970s. Several videos feature current stories of immigrants and commercial life.

Thanks to technology, public access to museum collections has been rendered both deep and respectful of people's desire to create their own meanings. It also allows the opportunity to find and comment on the many layers of meanings others have experienced.²²

The various technologies now available to designers (when clients can afford them) can provide something called *presence*, a term often used in video games and virtual reality and "defined loosely as 'the feeling of being there'" (McMahan 2003, 69–70). In an old-fashioned medium like theater—or literature—the viewer has to be an active interpreter of the narrative. But technology can essentially do that work for you—that is, break down the so-called fourth wall more easily. The exhibitions I've mentioned contain numerous examples: the condensed-time video loop of Darwin's "thinking path," the subway car in *Teen Tokyo*, and the sound installations of the Pequot Museum or African Burial Ground.

How does technology contribute to working in the subjunctive mood? While it enables the telling of stories, the creation of presence, and the possibility for participation, dialogue, and shared meaning-making, it is only one of the strategies available, and it has to be in service, in my opinion, to the principles derived from story, imagination, and aesthetic experience. Some argue, for example, that in the digital age when information can be accessed randomly online rather than in a sequential or narrative mode, we may be moving into new patterns of thinking beyond the story form. (This intriguing idea has been explored extensively in literature and film—for example, Julio Cortazar's novel *Hopscotch* and the 2000 film *Memento*.) But designers of interactive media for exhibitions and elsewhere continue to work from a storyline. As Mike Jones, a technologist, author, and consultant, recently explained in an interview on designer Seb Chan's blog, *Fresh & New(er)*:

I think what we have to recognize is that technology has never actually changed what a story is. No story-telling technology is near so huge in impact as Radio was to a previously Theatrical and Literary culture. And yet a Radio Play conforms to all the same principles of character, tension, action, catharsis and transformation as a book, play or movie for that matter.

The technology changed what mechanics you had at your disposal to tell that story but it didn't change what a story was or why people wanted them, what engaged and satisfied them (Jones 2012).

Nonetheless, it is clear that technology will continue to alter not only visitor expectations for the museum visit but also how exhibitions are designed and experienced. As we break down the fourth wall more and more, will the resultant higher level of "presence" generate a new medium, or simply a more effective version of the one we currently have? Will higher presence guarantee more of *an* experience with a greater expansion of meaning, or will it provide something engaging but utterly unmemorable, closer to recognition rather than perception, leaving us entertained but unmoved? From my perspective, technology that is employed in the service of story, imagination, and aesthetic experience can only heighten the rich potential of exhibitions to matter to visitors.

Theatricality Welcomes Visitors into the Narrative

As explained earlier, two basic elements make up narrative: the story itself—what happened—and then the narrative discourse, the way a particular medium, whether book, film, video game, or exhibition, tells it. Each medium has its own challenges and opportunities, but exhibition is the only one that can be "a fully embodied experience of objects and media in three-dimensional space, unfolding in a potentially free-flowing temporal sequence" (Macleod et al. 2012, xxi).²³ No other art form can claim this particular mix, with the possible exception of theater. And so it isn't surprising that several of the exhibitions I've mentioned were created by professionals with theatrical backgrounds or instincts: Jim Sims (*Field to Factory*), Brad Thiel (*Open House*), Janet Kamien (*Inside Ancient Egypt*), and Darcie Fohrman (*Daniel's Story*). Their work challenges us to think about the ways in which exhibition resembles theater and how such a perspective supports the subjunctive mood.

Theatrically-inclined designers create a threshold experience for visitors that makes them feel welcome and secure in their knowledge of what follows; this is the *liminal space*, an anthropologist's term for transitional rites or times. It is the space, real or metaphorical, between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the known and the unknown—that is, the imagined world of an exhibition. *Open House* creates this transitional moment with a friendly and reassuring invitation by an open door:

Open House: If These Walls Could Talk

What stories lie inside one ordinary house? To find out, we picked a real, existing house and dug into its past. Fifty families lived at 470/472 Hopkins Street on St. Paul's East Side across 118 years. Come explore their stories.

Inside Ancient Egypt does it somatically. One enters the exhibition by walking down into a (partially re-created) Egyptian tomb. Many exhibitions use media to create a feeling of presence, of being in a new reality—from soundtracks or simple projections on scrims to elaborate media presentations, such as *Freedom Rising*, which integrates media and live performance to orient visitors to Philadelphia's National Constitution Center.

One of the most effective and popular methods is theatrical programming. Museum theater is its own interdisciplinary field and supports an enormous range of practices. Examples include a permanent stage and residential theater company, such as City Stage at the Boston Children's Museum; floor staff trained in theatrical techniques, like those at *Imagine It!* The Children's Museum of Atlanta; intensive immersion through consistent first-person interpretation like that at Plimoth Plantation or Mount Vernon; scheduled programs or tours by actors, such as the Lower East Side Tenement Museum's *Victoria Confino* program; or, most typical of all, the addition of period costumes and props to provide a sense of place through third-person interpretive techniques at historic houses and sites. According to Dale Jones, a longtime practitioner and consultant on museum theater, the point is really to bring static space to life for visitors. He points to the longitudinal study by the Centre for Applied Theatre Research at the University of Manchester, which evaluated four different kinds of theatrical programs in Great Britain and underscores the value they add to the museum experience.²⁴

But it is also possible to design the exhibition itself in a more theatrical way—for example, to cast the visitors intentionally as the actors. They are then pulled into the narrative, invited to interact with the artifacts and scenery and mingle with the other participants the exhibit team provides—characters made present through recorded voices, projected faces and scenes, soundscapes, and other media—and encouraged to enact the story themselves. These visitors are granted the right, the agency, to make things happen. *Open House* offers a variety of opportunities to affect the action—touching a silver dollar on a bureau in the 1950s bedroom to set off home movies on the mirror, or plopping down on a bed to initiate an oral history—along with hands-on activities such as the block of ice in the kitchen described earlier in this chapter. Throughout, the visitor-actor interprets the script that the museum provides, making meaning and also making history in the open-minded way the exhibition team intended. There is even a kind of Aristotelian unity to the story. We begin the visit to the house with an immigrant family in their front parlor and end with an immigrant family in their living room. One is German American, the other Vietnamese American. But perhaps this unity is only in the visitor's imagination?

Field to Factory drew heavily on theatricality. The first section, the South, is revealed behind a scrim; one glimpses figures bent over their work outside half-ruined wooden buildings. Curator Spencer Crew wanted visitors to understand that these wooden shacks were home, that heading north meant deep loss. The designer's job was to create this inchoate understanding in the visitor. Once you leave "home," you must enter the railroad station—choosing the door for White or Colored—for the train north to the factories. Visitors re-create the journey made by millions of people, but they add their own individual sensibilities.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum took a different approach in its permanent exhibition: visitors are bystanders to the story, witnesses to what happened and what did not. After observing a photo collage showing people being deported to the concentration camps, you walk through a railroad car and are faced with images of Nazi officers splitting families apart, selecting some for work and others to be killed. The perspective of witnessing is underscored in the museum's main atrium with a quote from the bible that says "you are my witnesses" (Isaiah 43:10).

Each of these iconic exhibitions—all historical narratives—illustrates how the confines of a strict chronology can be opened up. Because the exhibitions involve personal choice, somatic experiences, narrativity rather than didacticism

in the text, powerfully evocative and often metaphorical objects—like the milk can remembered above to anchor the plot—and other invitations to individual interpretation and participation, they transcend the more traditional forced march of many historical exhibitions. Conventional wisdom would hold that visitors must be free to go how and where they choose, but these exhibitions depend on pursuing a particular path. But they do that through a deft combination of fact and feelings. Unlike the intensely technology-driven storytelling of the Lincoln Museum, these narratives honor the meaning of *an* experience, of perception over recognition, and of the need for imagination to be given enough breathing space.²⁵

Authenticity Is the Yardstick for Meaningful Experiences

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey contrasts artistic to scientific truth:

In an intellectual experience [i.e., scientific inquiry], the conclusion has value on its own account. It can be extracted as a formula or as a “truth,” and can be used in its independent entirety as factor and guide in other inquiries. In a work of art there is no such single self-sufficient deposit. The end, the terminus, is significant not by itself but as the integration of the parts. It has no other existence. A drama or novel is not the final sentence, even if the characters are disposed of as living happily ever after (Dewey 1934, 55).

Bruner’s analysis of the paradigmatic versus the narrative mode centers on a similar distinction. As mentioned earlier, he notes that both modes can be used to convince someone of something, “yet what they convince *of* is fundamentally different: arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness” (Bruner 1986, 11; italics added).

If one were to reframe exhibitions as aesthetic rather than purely educational experiences, how should we think about “truth”? Once the exhibition field began to embrace narrative—or, in educational language, constructivism—over the transmission of knowledge, it had to acknowledge, if not privilege, the creation of personal meaning over the uncovering of truth. If visitors are looking for meaning and measuring their encounters by the yardstick of personal authenticity (“it seems right to me”), then they are approaching exhibitions in the way Northrop Frye talks about theater:

The poet's job is not to tell you what happened, but what happens: not what did take place, but the kind of thing that always takes place. He gives you the typical, recurring, or what Aristotle calls universal event. You wouldn't go to *Macbeth* to learn about the history of Scotland—you go to it to learn what a man feels like after he's gained a kingdom and lost his soul (Frye 1964, 64).

How are we to reconcile this with a professional commitment to scholarship as well as the public's professed faith in museums as truth tellers? This question came up frequently in the development of *Choosing to Participate*, including the design of a new component. This section tells the story of Arn Chorn-Pond, a childhood survivor of the Cambodian killing fields who eventually escaped to a refugee camp and was adopted by an American aid worker named Peter Pond. The goal is to help young visitors understand that everyone has a story—for example, the foreign kid sitting next to you in math class—and that telling and listening can also be acts of participation.

In developing the section, the design team wrestled with the question of whose version of the story is the true one. How do we reconcile Arn's unhappy version of his early tumultuous days at a rural American high school with what we later learned was the school's sympathetic and intensive efforts to make him feel at home? The former perspective is what gives the story resonance with young visitors; the latter is part of the actual record. To what extent have the different perspectives changed with time and with the very human desire to put things in a positive light? The answer was to respect the multiple versions of the truth and let the visitors, as they inevitably will, make up their own minds, while at the same time permitting Arn's story—the dramatic, aesthetic experience, so to speak—to set the stage. Another approach was employed in the creation of *Daniel's Story* at the Holocaust Museum, as the staff created a fictional Daniel whose life details were based on exhaustive research to mirror typical experiences.

The team designing *Open House* faced some similar challenges. The goal was to “encourage visitors to explore the interconnections between ‘story,’ ‘memory,’ and ‘history’” (Minnesota Historical Society 2003). In this effort, the team included both typical and atypical aspects of the various time periods depicted in the house. The historical research was prodigious, often contributing ephemeral details that enhanced an unfolding narrative of everyday life over time.

Framing exhibitions as aesthetic experience enables one to work in a zone between imagination and rigorous concern for the historical record. For example, addressing its declining visitation, which reflects a nationwide problem, a living history museum decided to evaluate its interpretive strategies. A couple of staff members were eager to bring more unique and dramatically rich details to their well-established tableau of generic nineteenth-century village life. But others feared that if, for instance, the new narrative included the one person they had found in the historical record who believed in hanging garlic wreaths to ward off vampires, then visitors would think all nineteenth-century Americans shared such superstitions. But the model of exhibition as aesthetic experience shows us that specific, concrete detail is precisely what generates meaning making. It doesn't yield some kind of abstract principle or textbook interpretation ("American Rural Religious Beliefs: The Role of Vampires in the 19th Century"), but rather a series of imaginative reflections: "Gosh, I wonder how many people did this? I wonder why he believed in vampires? Did anyone else? Or even, perhaps, I wonder if garlic really works?"

Writers assume their readers are likely to either "under-read" or "over-read" a narrative (Abbott 2002, 79–83). But in the museum field, despite its tentative embrace of constructivism, we often insist that as long as different learning styles are acknowledged, the same content can be taught to all our visitors. In my opinion, we are more wedded to the "truth," the social scientist's goal—the paradigmatic—than to the "authentic"—the yardstick for storytellers and artists. But given that exhibitions exist in the imagined, constructed world that is created and interpreted by exhibition developer/designer and visitor, might not the goal of the "authentic"—of truth as "the uncovering of meaning"—be the more appropriate choice? I would suggest that the exhibitions that people—including myself—find most memorable are those that strike the human chord, that resonate with what we believe and feel to be true.

In creating an exhibition about a period in time, a culture, or the theory of evolution, the "truth"—the record—absolutely must be respected if museums are to remain trusted guardians of cultural heritage. But if we are no longer in the business of transmitting knowledge, then we need a different language for describing and understanding what we do. And that can be found in the arts. In other words, Freeman Tilden, the architect of historic interpretation, had it right when he described a colleague in this way:

He thoroughly enjoyed his stay upon this planet, which he found so full of a number of things . . . and he enjoyed pointing out these things in a new light. . . . He never forgot that the feeling of an exhibit and the need for it to tell a story were quite as important as its factual truthfulness (quoted in Ott 2001).